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ABSTRACT

ReWrite is a teaching strategy designed to help students explore content area topics using music. Starting with limited knowledge about a topic, students read, watch videos, visit museums, listen to guest speakers, and collect new ideas about a topic that they can write about in music form. ReWrite offers a means of exploring common misconceptions students have about a topic. In this strategy, music has the potential to engage students' interest, foster small group interaction in concept learning, and enhance abstract reasoning. Steps in the ReWrite strategy include: (1) deciding what concepts students might understand, along with potential misconceptions about the topic; and (2) using a predictable, easy-to-follow melody, write some verses that reflect this limited knowledge about the topic. An original song, "Bats in My Yard Blues," was completed by preservice teachers using the ReWrite strategy as part of a themed unit on the desert in a course on assessment and instruction in reading and writing. (Contains eight references.) (CR)

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ReWrite: A music strategy for exploring content area concepts

Thomas W. Bean

Note: After reading this article, please visit the online discussion forum and share your comments.

The ReWrite strategy described in this article uses music to help students learn content area concepts. ReWrite offers a creative alternative to more traditional text guidance strategies.

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A few years ago I began using my hobby of playing blues guitar and writing songs to enhance students' textbook reading. Students often find content area concepts and related textbooks to be boring. However, students are also astute analysts of teaching that captures their interests. A high school student in my study of literacy history commented, "All we do in English is worksheet after worksheet. That's all we do in science too. We go to class, we get our worksheet, we correct them, and we go to our next class" (Bean, in press).

In contrast, this student's social studies teacher created a more stimulating learning environment by encouraging student-directed learning in activity selection as well as using small groups to work on projects. "He lets us participate in more of what we're doing. Plus, he gives us freedom -- we work in groups all the time. As long as we get our work done and participate, we do okay" (Bean, in press). The teaching strategy introduced in this article, ReWrite, capitalizes on small group learning that is directed at rewriting a song to correct misconceptions about a topic.

The ReWrite strategy

ReWrite is a teaching strategy designed to help students explore content area topics using music. Starting with limited knowledge about a topic, students read, watch videos, visit museums, listen to guest speakers, and collect new ideas about a topic that they can write about in music form. Music, particularly in the ReWrite strategy described in this

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article, offers a means of exploring common misconceptions students have about a topic. Moreover, song writing helps students to progress beyond their initial misconceptions about a topic to form rich, accurate conceptual knowledge structures.

In order to engage as many classrooms as possible in trying the ReWrite strategy, I have been introducing it to students in my college preservice courses. The song demonstrated in this article was introduced and rewritten in a class of senior-level preservice elementary teachers. This course on assessment and instruction in reading and writing includes a field-based practicum experience and precedes the student teaching semester. Although the students in this class may have had a music methods course, most were not music education majors.

Music has the potential to engage students' interest, foster small group interaction in concept learning, and enhance abstract reasoning (Miller & Coen, 1994). Using music to go beyond otherwise static modes of content presentation such as lecturing, worksheet completion, and summarization fits nicely within a constructivist theory of learning. Constructivist models of learning emphasize the social development of knowledge through active problem solving (Merrill, 1992).

I and my group of elementary preservice teachers completed the song in the article -- "Bats in My Yard Blues" -- as a part of a themed unit on the desert. The unit began with students venturing off to the campus desert museum to collect information on plants, animals, crafts, peoples, and history related to the Mojave Desert. One of the subtopics we explored in the unit focused on bats that inhabit the Mojave Desert. Fruit bats are common in the Mojave Desert area outside Las Vegas. They can be seen in the evening in the more remote neighborhoods near the Spring Mountains. Most people think of bats as filthy, blood-sucking, vampire-related creatures that conjure up images of Dracula. However, fruit bats are clean and gentle, and they contribute much to our environment. Fruit bats are found in many areas of the world, but in some regions their numbers are threatened because they are considered a delicacy. Thus, given the common misconceptions people have about bats, this topic was a likely candidate for the ReWrite strategy.

Much like an anticipation-reaction guide that introduces students to common misconceptions about a content area topic (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1995), the first song in the ReWrite strategy should be brief and introduce misconceptions about the topic. For example, most people are fearful of bats, have little understanding that fruit bats differ from vampire bats, and fail to appreciate the contributions of bats to our environment. In the section that follows, I will guide you through a ReWrite lesson with the preservice teachers based on my blues song "Bats in My Yard Blues," related text reading, and small group rewriting of the song to reflect new knowledge about bats.

Steps in the ReWrite strategy

Day one

1. Decide what concepts your students might understand, along with potential misconceptions about the topic.

2. Using a predictable, easy-to-follow melody, write some verses that reflect this limited knowledge of the topic.

For example, I wrote the following blues verses for "Bats in My Yard Blues" in the key of E with a basic Chicago-style shuffle rhythm.

Bats in My Yard Blues

E

Whenever I go out in my yard at night

Bats fly around and I flee in fright

A

They circle my head flapping their wings in the air

E

They drive me crazy 'cause they might land in my hair

CHORUS

B7A

Big bats, little bats, bats with babies,

E

I run for the door before they give me rabies

E

I heard vampire bats suck your blood

Well I'll take my rifle and shoot em like Elmer Fudd

A

They won't get me, no, no, no, no....

E

I'll spray 'em with Raid till they go, go, go

B7 A

Big bats, little bats, bats with babies,

E

I run for the door before they give me rabies

Sound Clip (800 kB)

3. This step is optional, but I frequently develop a study guide to go with the song. For example, in this lesson you could include an anticipation-reaction guide consisting of statements about bats that students may agree or disagree with (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1995). Following the song and text reading, students can revisit the guide to change any initial responses in light of new knowledge. This extra step may be helpful if you are working with at-risk learners. Otherwise, the ReWrite song serves as a means of collecting and displaying new knowledge.

4. Give students a copy of the song and perform it. I played the bat song on my guitar and sang the verses, but you can prerecord a tape and play it in class if you prefer. In addition, you do not need to be a musician to use the ReWrite strategy. Any popular, predictable melody from blues, folk, pop, rock and roll, or country music will do. Students can contribute suggestions for song melodies to use. Karaoke tapes offer another vehicle that works for this strategy.

The information about bats in song form was designed to activate students' prior knowledge before they engaged in text reading. I find that students enjoy "rewriting" my flawed initial version to show off their newfound knowledge following text reading, field trips, videos, and Internet research.

Day two

1. Have students read the text (or assign as homework).

In the bats example, my students read a section of *Bats: Creatures of the Night* by Joyce Milton and Judith Moffatt (1993) that describes bats' anatomy, varieties, and locales, and that casts doubt on many of the misconceptions people hold about bats.

2. In small groups of 3 to 4 students, have students rewrite the original song by asking each group to create a new verse that corrects misconceptions and includes new knowledge. The original song serves as a model for writing verses that fit the form of the melody. In the bats example, I used a blues structure that is fairly easy to follow, much like writing a poem using a predictable format.

3. Ask students to share their version with other groups by reading aloud. I usually collect these, assign group points for the activity, and take the verses home to assemble into a coherent song we can perform. If time allows, you can have students suggest ways the various small group verses might go together. This problem-solving stage is similar to piecing together any puzzle.

We entitled the song that resulted from this activity, "Bats in My Yard Blues II." It opens with the original two verses and chorus along with an additional verse from one

group that, despite all the new information on bats, still felt they were creepy. The new verses and new chorus from the other groups challenged these naive notions. I enlisted the help of two fifth graders to sing the chorus on the new version, and we made a tape to play in class for my preservice teacher group. Finally, my class performed the song, with each group singing their respective verses and the whole class doing the chorus. The new version follows.

Bats in My Yard Blues II

Whenever I go out in my yard at night

Bats fly around and I flee in fright

They circle my head flapping their wings in the air

They drive me crazy 'cause they might land in my hair

CHORUS

Big bats, little bats bats with babies

I run for the door before they give me rabies

I heard vampire bats suck your blood

Well I'll take my rifle and shoot em like Elmer Fudd

They won't get me no, no, no, no...

I'll spray em with Raid till they go, go, go

Fat bat, fat bat, go away

I'm not the one for you today

I know it's getting dark and you fly low

I run into the house where you can't go

CHORUS

But after I studied bats in class

I realized they aren't so bad

Some bats are big and some bats are small

Fact is, there's more than 1000 types in all

NEW CHORUS

Big bats, little bats, bats with babies

Now I let them in the house even if it sounds crazy

The bat is the world's only flying mammal

I'm sure you won't confuse it with the desert camel

Bats are beneficial in many ways

They help reforestation all their days

NEW CHORUS

I heard bats are smart maybe smarter than my dog

You should see them all navigating the fog

They never hit a tree or a powerline

Boy-oh-boy bats sure are fine

NEW CHORUS

Much to our surprise bats are clean and gentle

Don't want one as pet -- that would make me mental

I'd rather have a dog, even a pig

But I know bats won't eat me, they just like figs

NEW CHORUS

Some bats are useful as you can see

Out in the jungle they pollinate trees

They have wings and they also have feet

Who thought bats could be so neat?

NEW CHORUS

Sound Clip (800 kB)

A song written by a community of learners in a classroom has special value to this group (Cockburn, 1995). Most important, direct learning outcomes from ReWrite include enriched knowledge structures in a musical form that serves as a readily available jog to the memory. Tunes are catchy, memorable, and fun, especially for the composers and performers. Students enjoy the integration of music with concepts, and their creativity in constructing verses helps them feel some power over a text that may otherwise induce sleep through page after page of turgid prose.

It is important to display copies of the song lyrics with group names in the classroom. As a unit progresses, ReWrite songs become interesting records of student learning. They can be an entry in students' portfolios, and I find that students remember concepts taught through the medium of music. Much like a catchy pop tune that stays with you throughout the day, a song you actually write and perform is very memorable. Music can also be used as an excellent means of exploring language for second language learners (Cockburn, 1995).

It takes a teacher willing to model creative risk taking, but in my experience using the ReWrite strategy in a variety of classrooms, the outcome is well worth the risk. This strategy can be especially helpful for students when combined with additional scaffolding in the form of guide material.

Additional music resources

As you are searching for ways to use music as a learning tool, summaries of additional strategies are available in *The Reading Teacher*. For example, Scott (1996) describes her use of instrumental classical music as a means of stimulating reluctant fourth graders' creative writing. Kolb (1996), a primary grade Title I teacher, described her use of music lyrics to expand children's shared book experiences, sight vocabulary, and comprehension.

Summary

Music provides a way to motivate students, to promote conceptual change, and to give students an opportunity to focus closely on content. It enables students to participate actively in the learning process and to use reading and writing for real purposes. ReWrite increases students' interest in content learning and taps their creative talents.

Note: After reading this article, please visit the online discussion forum and share your comments.

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